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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NAIROBI 002385

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SUBJECT: EMBU BISHOP: MPS WANT TO KEEP 'EM POOR & IGNORANT

Classified By: PolCouns Andre for reasons 1.4 B & D.

¶1. (C) Summary: The Bishop of Embu Diocese maintains that Mbere District's Members of Parliament purposely undermine efforts to raise educational standards and to develop the economy of the area so as to keep the population poor, dependent and easily manipulated. They also stymie projects with which they are not personally associated. This is much less the case in neighboring Embu district, which is more educated and developed. He expressed great concern about the growing khat trade in the region. End Summary.

¶2. (U) PolCouns recently met with the Catholic Bishop of the Embu Diocese, Rt. Rev. Antony Muheria, to discuss the social and political dynamics of the central region of Kenya's Eastern Province. The diocese covers the Embu and Mbere districts, which are the home regions of the Embu and Mbere communities. Together, the two groups make up about four percent of Kenya's population. These two ethnic groups are closely related and politically aligned with their Kikuyu neighbors. They overwhelmingly support the Kikuyu-led government of Mwai Kibaki.

¶3. (U) The Embu occupy the south slopes of Mount Kenya. The land is very fertile and well watered. Their Mbere cousins, who are essentially lowland Embu, live in the relatively parched lands below them. The Embu are much better educated and considerably better off than the Mbere. The Provincial Commissioner for Eastern Province pointed out to PolCouns that the disparity in upland/lowland economic and social conditions are a source of tension in the region.

¶4. (U) Bishop Mutheria emphasized that he spends most of his time on social and economic development issues, concentrating on the poorer Mbere district. The diocese is about 40% Catholic, the remainder being Protestant. There is a small Muslim community in Embu town, which is well integrated into Embu society and which enjoys cordial, cooperative relations with the region's other faiths.

¶5. (C) The Bishop alleged that Mbere district's Members of Parliament are the greatest impediment to increasing economic development and educational opportunities in the area. "The Mbere are desperately poor and so are easily manipulated. Their MPs do not want to change this. They like to keep their constituents dependent on them for handouts." The Bishop spoke of secular aid groups leaving the district in frustration when their development projects are undermined

through the interference of MPs and their representatives in the district. He said, "we are here for the long haul so our development programs must take this reality into consideration. We find ways to cajole, convert or embarrass MPs and their political networks into not opposing our programs." To this end, the Bishop often speaks out in public fora to bring pressure to bear on recalcitrant local politicians and officials to support new schools, the introduction of alternative crops to replace khat (such as aloe vera), tree planting and the curbing of charcoal production. The Bishop cited another motivation for the MPs' opposition to some development efforts as a desire to ensure that only projects with which they are personally associated go forward. They do not wish to see competing sources of influence flourish. "At times we agree to let them take some credit for our projects."

¶6. (U) The Bishop is passionately opposed to khat cultivation and trade. The crop was introduced some years ago. Its cultivation is now expanding rapidly. "Young boys drop out of school because they can make money growing the drug. They then get hooked on it themselves and progress to harder drugs." Several interlocutors in the area regaled PolCouns with lurid stories about khat-addled youths and khat-fueled truck drivers transporting the crop to market. Some local MPs, he alleged, use idle youth involved in the khat trade for "political violence and intimidation."

¶7. (SBU) The Bishop believes the answer to the region's issues lies in education and economic development. "All Mbere's problems are present in Embu, but to a much lesser degree. The difference is that the Embu are better educated and less poor. They are not so easily manipulated as the

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Mbere and so make better choices."

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